History Matters: Canada’s Contribution to the First Worldwide Study of Human Trafficking

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Malgré l’attention portée au trafic de personnes, la fondation empirique des politiques demeure problématique. Au cours des années 1920, la Société des Nations était le pionnier en recherche sur le trafic des personnes, effectuant la première étude intercontinentale. Du travail sur le terrain a été effectué dans 28 pays de l’Europe, des Amériques et de la Méditerranée; les chercheurs ont effectué 6 500 entrevues en 14 langues. Le travail sur le terrain effectué au Canada, le premier et dernier pays à être étudié, dévoile beaucoup au sujet des recherches actuelles sur le trafic de personnes. Ces premiers chercheurs ont rencontré des problèmes similaires à ceux des chercheurs actuels et leur rapport officiel comprend nombre des mêmes conclusions. La discussion de cet article explore le manque de fiabilité des estimations statistiques, la difficulté d’effectuer des recherches au sein de populations cachées, le manque de cas qui respecte les normes légales et la prétendue implication du crime organisé. L’article se termine avec des commentaires sur l’importance d’incorporer une perspective historique à la criminologie.

Mots clés : Trafic de personnes, méthodologie de recherche, criminologie historique, criminalité transnationale organisée

Despite the attention given to the issue of human trafficking, the empirical base for policy making remains problematic. During the 1920s, the League of Nations pioneered research into human trafficking with the first intercontinental study. Field work took place in 28 countries across Europe, the Americas, and the Mediterranean; researchers conducted 6,500 interviews in 14 languages. The fieldwork conducted in Canada, the first and last country to be studied, reveals a great deal about human trafficking research today. The researchers encountered problems familiar to current researchers and their official report contains many of the same conclusions. The discussion here explores the unreliability of statistical estimates, difficulties in researching hidden populations, the lack of cases meeting a legal standard, and claims about the involvement of organized crime. It concludes with comments about the importance of incorporating historical perspective into criminology.
Judging from the response of the Canadian government to UN directives, human trafficking is a serious issue of substantial proportion. There is, however, little empirical evidence suggesting that trafficking to Canada is a major problem (Gozdziak and Collett 2005; Martinez, Hanley, and Gomez 2005). What empirical research is available has been characterized by weak research designs, use of unreliable sources, and inadequate specification of concepts (see Goodey 2008; Kelly 2005; Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005). In fact, several scholars characterize significant aspects of human trafficking as a myth (Aronowitz 2009; Doezema 2000; Oude Breuil, Siegel, van Reenen, Beijer, and Roos 2011; Schloenhardt, Beirne, and Corsbie 2009).

Since the 1990s, there has been an avalanche of studies concerning human trafficking (Laczko 2005). Reading this literature, it would be easy to conclude that trafficking has immediate origins and is a problem without historical precedent. A 2008 report prepared for the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, for example, begins with the statement that trafficking in human beings for purposes of sexual exploitation has become a major issue “in recent years” and reviews policy decisions and media reports only as far back as 2000 (Swedish National Council 2008). Yet between 1919 and 1939, the League of Nations conducted an extensive campaign against the traffic in women that, in some ways, exceeded what international organizations such as the UN and EU have done since then. The League of Nations pioneered research into human trafficking with two intercontinental studies: the first covered 28 countries across Europe, the Americas, and the Mediterranean; the second covered some 20 countries, colonies, and territories in Asia (League of Nations 1927a, 1927b, 1933).

This essay brings some “lessons of history” to current academic discussion of human trafficking. In particular, I will address the notion that knowledge of human trafficking is sketchy because it represents “a relatively new type of crime” (David 2010) or results from “a more globalized world” (Shelley 2005, 2010). Looking back at the League’s research in Canada offers a deeper understanding of conceptual and practical problems in human trafficking research. From documents held at the League of Nations archive in Geneva, it is possible to recover not only the findings of previous research but the process that produced them (Rodríguez Garcia, in press). The Canadian portion of the League’s first study represents one of the more revealing aspects of
the entire project. Canada was the first and last country to be studied: fieldwork began at the outset of the project in April 1924 and continued until December 1926, only weeks before the publication of findings. Essentially, the three pages about Canada in (what became Part 2 of) the official report declare that trafficking in women was not a problem.

What the report does not say about why it required three years to make this declaration not only reveals a great deal about the League’s efforts then but also about human trafficking research now. Canada presented a real dilemma because, rather than trying to find evidence of trafficking, the researchers were trying to refute the evidence that had been found. The difficulty of establishing that trafficking does not exist helps explain its growth and persistence as a problem. Part 1 of the present article examines making estimates; Part 2, researching hidden populations; Part 3, the problem of legal evidence; and Part 4, the links to organized crime. I conclude with some comments about why it is important to incorporate historical perspective in criminology.

Making estimates

There are no reliable estimates of human trafficking. Official estimates of trafficking victims entering the United States have been revised downward at least three times, from between 45,000 and 50,000 in 1999, to between 18,000 and 20,000 in 2003, to between 14,500 and 17,500 a year later (Gozdziak and Collett 2005: 108). Low numbers of cases and victims reported in government documents stand in contrast to estimates offered by advocacy groups, community organizations, and other non-governmental organizations (Goodey 2008: 426; Schloenhardt, Beirne, and Corsbie 2009: 232).

The first attempt to obtain a social science measure of the traffic in women worldwide took place in the 1920s. During a three-year period, from 1924 to 1926, researchers commissioned by the League of Nations surveyed 67 governments about the nature and extent of trafficking. They collected reports from a variety of voluntary organizations, ranging from the International Abolitionist Federation to the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women. The researchers then conducted field research in 112 cities and 28 countries across the Americas, Europe, and the Mediterranean. A team conducted interviews with some 6,500 persons in 14 languages, including police authorities, welfare workers, health officials, and prostitutes, pimps,
and brothel-keepers. The official publication, *Report of the Special Body of Experts on the Traffic in Women and Children* (1927) confirmed the existence of trafficking in women but could not supply numbers of victims or traffickers. "All this evidence suggests…" the researchers declared, "that traffic in women is extensive, although no exact estimate of its extent can be given" (League of Nations 1927a: 12).

The study had grown out of the nineteenth-century campaign against the "white slave trade," which had produced the first international agreements (Hunt 2002; McLaren 1987). When World War I came to an end, anti-traffic campaigners turned their attention to the League of Nations. They managed to add a clause to the constitution that obligated the League to assume responsibility for international treaties agreed in 1904 and 1910. In 1921, the council created a permanent organization known as the Advisory Committee on the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children. The advisory committee decided that a worldwide social scientific study of the traffic in women would establish the facts of the trade beyond dispute and provide a substantive international agenda. To oversee the study, the council appointed a committee, known as the Special Body of Experts into the Traffic in Women, consisting of representatives from Italy, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Japan, Uruguay, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Dr. William Snow, who had taken leave from Stanford University to become director of the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), chaired the committee. To carry out the study, Snow relied on ASHA experience and expertise (see, generally, Chaumont 2009; Knepper 2011).

Snow took it upon himself to investigate the situation Canada. W.J. Egan, Canada’s Deputy Minister of Immigration and Colonization, had given an ambiguous response to the League’s official questionnaire. The question of the international white slave traffic was difficult to answer, Egan (1924) said, because, while there were “evidences that persons interested in the traffic are active,” when it came down to “producing evidence, there is little upon which to place reliance.” Egan deferred to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), who possessed more information about trafficking than any other department of government (Egan 1924). The RCMP had sent a representative to London in 1923 for the meeting of the International Bureau for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic and had organized a system of “strangers’ secretaries” to guide young women to safety when they arrived from abroad (RCMP 1924: 22). This protective network, the RCMP’s annual report declared, had forced traffickers to alter their
methods for importing prostitutes: “In consequence of the vigilance which is being exercised, procurers are showing a disposition to bring women into the country as cabin passengers; several specific examples of this have been detected” (RCMP 1924: 23).

Snow contacted the commissioner of the RCMP, Cortlandt Starnes, who opened the files at Ottawa. Snow weighed the evidence. While he encountered a fair amount of material, he noticed that most of the cases had been unearthed by a single source, an RCMP investigator named John Chisholm. And although Chisholm had prepared documents indicating a substantial trade in the bodies of women, his accounts did not contain the names of the actual victims. Snow was skeptical. In summarizing his findings for the Special Body of Experts in Geneva, he acknowledged that Chisholm possessed “interesting information,” but added, “I feel I should say that I do not believe Mr Chisholm’s evidence is worth very much to us” (Special Body of Experts 1924b: 10–11). “No one doubts the sincerity and honesty and thoroughness of Mr Chisholm’s work,” Snow told the special body, “but it does seem in this case as if he assumed certain things” (Special Body of Experts 1924b: 13–14).

The problem with Chisholm, Snow’s researchers decided, was that he had motivation to exaggerate the problem (Chaumont 2009: 83–84). Born in Nova Scotia, Reverend Chisholm served as a missionary in western Canada before moving to Montreal, where he became immigration chaplain of the Presbyterian Church. In 1916, Chisholm helped found the Directorate of Protestant Female Immigration, which operated out of Dorchester House, a hostel for women. He had also founded the strangers’ secretaries system. The Canadian government provided a small budget for this work and, to enable him to inspect incoming ships, gave him the status of an RCMP investigator. Snow sent a lawyer who had worked for the ASHA, George Worthington, to Canada to interview Chisholm and other persons in the anti-traffic movement. Worthington dismissed Chisholm’s claims as self-serving: Chisholm would not be able to raise money from supporters for Dorchester House if he did not “have something which … would appeal to their sympathies.” His supporters wanted to hear terrible things, so he offered it, even if he had to fabricate it (Worthington 1924c).

To support this conclusion, Worthington cited his interview with Grant Riddoch, superintendent of the Boys Hostel in Montreal. Riddoch explained why Chisholm, who was “daffy” on the issue of white slave
traffic, managed to hold on to his post as a government officer. Canadian policies accommodated the two big railways, the Canadian Pacific (CPR) and Canadian National (CNR). The railways wanted a supply of immigrants to pay for their steamship lines and to populate sections of the country in which they had built rail links. To encourage immigration, the government placed no restrictions. In fact, young men who wished to settle collected $14 from the government, and young women received the equivalent from Chisholm’s organization. The CNR supported the Boys Hostel and the CPR supported Dorchester House, both of which represented essential cogs in the immigration machinery. The government was “willing to ‘wink’ at Chisholm’s eccentricities on the subject of white slavery” so as not to endanger population growth (Worthington 1924a).

The “Chisholm dilemma,” so to speak, remains one the chief obstacles to accurate estimates today. Non-governmental organizations play a disproportionate role in shaping information about the problem of human trafficking and this results in a credibility gap in the empirical basis for human trafficking being a problem. The estimates these groups supply are even less reliable than those of governments: they tend to exaggerate (Lehti and Aromaa 2007: 139; Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005: 17; Schloenhardt, Beirne, and Corsbie 2009: 227; Zhang 2009: 179). This tendency to overestimation does not represent an aberration but is a more-or-less permanent part of the conceptualization of human trafficking as an international problem. NGOs need to attract funds and secure political support, so they generate numbers, however uncertain or unlikely these numbers may be (Tyldum 2010: 10). Further, it has been suggested that, at least for some activists, “exaggeration is not a major problem, as long as attention ends up being given to whatever abuses are occurring” (Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005: 17).

Researching hidden populations

Another reason for the lack of credible estimates of human trafficking is that we are dealing with a hidden population (Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005: 18). The activities take place out of view, and those involved try to keep a low profile. Much of what we “know” about human trafficking comes from interviews with experts or intermediaries; that is, police, welfare workers, and so on. Much less information comes from contact with actual trafficking victims or traffickers themselves (Gozdziak and Collett 2005: 116; Zhang 2009: 185). In a review of 100 studies of trafficking, Zhang (2009: 185) found only one that contained
interviews with possible traffickers. Further, current research fails to retrieve information in social settings where the sex trade occurs, such as brothels, massage parlours, and strip clubs. To improve our understanding of trafficking, researchers have called for ethnographic studies in concrete locations (Gozdziak and Collett 2005; Tyldum 2010; van der Pijl, Oude Breuil, and Siegel 2011; Oude Breuil et al. 2011).

For a preview of what a multi-site ethnography carried out on a wide scale could produce, we can look back to the League’s research. Snow did not trust official sources and insisted the research engage in “on the spot” investigations. At an early session of the committee of experts, he announced that his colleague from the ASHA, Bascom Johnson, would become director of field investigations. Johnson dispatched 8 to 10 investigators and they made visits to more than 100 cities throughout the Atlantic and Mediterranean regions. They interviewed police, health authorities, and other officials as well as welfare workers and leaders of voluntary organizations working with women. They also talked to prostitutes, pimps, and other figures in the sex industry, including some who claimed to be engaged in the traffic (Chaumont 2009; Knepper 2012). The problem they faced then – which remains a key problem now – was site selection. Where, when looking for evidence of the worldwide traffic in women, do you start? How do you know if you have found the important sites?

The solution then was to make inquiries “in cities and countries to which women are alleged to have been sent for purposes of prostitution” (League of Nations 1927a: 5); “alleged,” that is to say, newspaper reports, rumours among advocacy groups, claims by political authorities, and so on. Johnson commenced fieldwork in April 1924 with a steamship voyage to Buenos Aires, which was believed to be the primary destination for the white slaves of Europe. His investigators then worked backwards, visiting ports and cities on routes from Eastern Europe to South America and added cities in North Africa and the Middle East as alternative destinations. In their report to the League, they confidently declared that they had found the centre. The investigators made contact with “certain prominent characters in the underworld of some cities of South America” and by visiting cities with whom these individuals claimed to have some links, managed to locate “the centre of the so-called ‘ring’” within each country and ensure “the ‘right people’ in each centre were studied” (League of Nations 1927a: 6).
How did League’s researchers know they had found the right people at the major centres? This was not clear from the report. Generally, they followed a protocol adopted on that first visit to Buenos Aires. While Johnson made the rounds of government offices, another investigator made undercover inquiries in music halls, cabarets, late-night cafés, and brothels. Snow and Johnson, along with colleagues on the League’s advisory commission, believed that the music hall industry served as a cover for the international traffic. Traffickers moved women around the world under the guise of supplying dancers and singers as music halls artistes (Knepper 2009). Further, the anti-traffic campaigners believed that traffickers dealt not only in women but in narcotic drugs. So, to find evidence of traffic, investigators looked for places that offered dancing and drugs. Where there were prostitutes, there were drugs; and where there were prostitutes and drugs, there was international traffic in women (Carstairs 1998: 150).

The Canadian investigation reveals the role of other criteria for site selection, which, had it become known, would have attracted intense criticism. To choose Canadian sites, the League’s researchers relied on a dubious indicator of deviant sexuality: French identity. “Frenchness” had a special place in the Anglo-American imagination concerning sexual immorality (Slater 2007). Anti-trafficking campaigners accepted reports from police and other informants that, within the sex industry, foreign women tended to command higher fees and French women traded at the highest value. Worthington was selected for the Canadian field study because he spoke and read French fluently. He travelled to Canada in July and again in October of 1924. He visited Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec, Halifax, St John, Vancouver, and Victoria, but concentrated on Montreal, where, in addition to interviews with immigration authorities, police managers, and those working for voluntary associations, he conducted undercover surveillance. He sampled cabarets, parlour houses, and dance halls in the red light district (Worthington 1924a).

He decided there was little, if any, white slave traffic, except for in Montreal. Worthington had spoken with Oliver Carignan, secretary for Montreal’s Committee of Sixteen, an organization founded in 1916 to protect young women from sexual immorality. So far as Carignan knew, most of those working in the red light district were older, local women. He had heard from an underworld contact that one of two of the madams travelled to Paris for women, but admitted this was only a rumour (Worthington 1924c). Worthington accepted this story. He reasoned that when madams travelled to Paris, they would choose
women to bring back who could make the most money; that is, women already working in the sex industry, as they would be “much more tractable” (Worthington 1924b).

Apparently, Worthington’s speculation was enough to rattle Snow. Before concluding that Canada had no trafficking problem, he sent a second investigator to Montreal. Paul Kinsie was the ASHA’s chief undercover operative, a man who had been making undercover investigations into prostitution since 1916 or so. In late November 1926, Kinsie mentioned to Johnson that “Canada still is hanging fire.” Snow had suggested he make a “hurried visit to Canada, particularly Montreal.” Kinsie, in turn, had telegraphed Worthington to acquire from him “information relative to the points in question,” as Snow had also suggested, but had yet to receive a reply (Kinsie 1926a). Several days later, Kinsie told Johnson he was leaving for Canada (Kinsie 1926b). Kinsie spent the first week of December 1926 in Montreal. Despite a heavy snowfall, he made the acquaintance of taxi cab drivers, chauffeurs, bell hops, bartenders, and others likely to know about vice resorts. They told him that the red light district had been abolished (see Lévesque 1989), but that he would have no problem finding prostitutes, particularly in the French section. He canvassed 50 disorderly houses to interview inmates and operators. He did not find a single foreign prostitute under 21 years of age; all of the women claimed to be Canadian or French-Canadian (Kinsie 1926d). At a house on Cadieux Street, Kinsie spoke with the madam. She confirmed that there were no girls from France in her employ, only French Canadians (Kinsie 1926c). This was good enough for Snow.

The larger uncertainties remain, however. Ethnographic studies reveal part of a larger picture that remains out of view. Or, as Tyldum and Brunovskis (2005: 28) put it: informants in any particular city amount to a subset of an unknown population. The problem with much of the trafficking research in recent years is this same lack of transparency. Trafficking researchers have offered insights from interviews with victims (who have been identified by policy or advocacy organizations) but do not disclose how this research was carried out (Gozdziak and Collett 2005: 122; Kelly 2005: 237; Putt 2007: 6). Studies do not report essential background, such as how researchers gathered information from individuals who spoke other languages. How and when were such translations made? There is never any discussion about how interviews were conducted with women who speak various languages, or how such translations might affect the depth and quality of data (Kelly 2005: 237).
Searching for actual cases

Despite the attention to human trafficking in recent years, finding actual cases that meet a legal standard has proven quite difficult. Prosecutions of traffickers have been rare (Goodey 2008: 430; Zhang 2009: 184–5). In Australia, there were only four convictions for trafficking offences from 1999 to 2009. More cases have been dismissed due to lack of evidence or have been appealed to higher courts (Schloenhardt, Beirne, and Corsbie 2009: 235). In Finland, there had been, as of 2009, only one conviction for trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation (Viuhko 2010: 64–65). The US government has also found it difficult to locate actual human traffickers. After spending hundreds of millions of dollars on anti-trafficking efforts, the number of prosecutions and convictions has remained low (Zhang 2009: 184–85). It may be that evidence will emerge, as lawmakers craft sharper definitions and law enforcement authorities engage in greater coordination. But if the League’s experience in the 1920s serves as a guide, you would have to say, “probably not.”

Overall, the League’s researchers turned up few cases. As Snow explained to the Special Body of Experts, Canada recruited women interested in a life on the prairies and, to ensure they arrived at the farms, set up a surveillance network. When ships reached a port like Montreal, local organizations like Chisholm’s arranged for “conductresses” to ferry them to the railway station. The Canadian Pacific Railway then provided conductresses to accompany the women until they reached cities such as Winnipeg. When women disappeared between Montreal and Winnipeg, social workers made reports to police. There was a “divided opinion,” Snow said, about how many women leaked from the surveillance system and what became of those who went south. So, it had been necessary to “go at considerable length into a study of those cases, which were suggested as indicating a considerable international traffic between Canada and the United States” (Special Body of Experts 1924a: 11).

Snow decided that “not many of these girls are in any sense forced to go across the line into lives of prostitution” (Special Body of Experts 1924a: 11). What sometimes happened, he surmised, was that some young women entered hasty marriages with Americans. It was difficult to know for sure. Canadian immigration authorities relied on the RCMP, and a review of their records relating to international traffic turned up “no adequate and clear-cut cases.” There were several cases “where suspicion has been aroused,” but researchers would follow
these to a certain point and then “all trace is lost and one has to give up” (Special Body of Experts, 1924b: 9). “In all of this study of such cases I am impressed with the difficulty of getting facts, which are established facts, as against getting merely suggested probabilities. That has been the case in other countries.” While there was a long border between Canada and the United States, and large numbers of people crossed for one reason or another, including prostitutes, Snow continued, “[W]e have found very little evidence on either border of actual commercialized traffic in the sense that we, as a Commission, are looking for” (Special Body of Experts 1924a: 12–13).

Snow instructed Worthington to track down the Canadian cases in the United States to verify any traffic across the border (Snow 1924). Worthington made inquiries, but the results were less definitive than Snow wanted. For example, Worthington contacted the Bureau of Investigation at the Department of Justice in Washington, DC (to become known as the FBI) for information about two French girls who were said to have passed through Canada to the United States. The Bureau’s director, J. Edgar Hoover, thought enough of what the League of Nations was trying to do that he looked into the matter personally. Hoover instructed his offices in Detroit and Chicago to investigate and learned the pair had landed in Illinois. The special agent discovered that they had created quite a stir, and the local police had pushed them out of town. They had already returned to Canada before the agent could interrogate them (Hoover 1926). In late October 1926, a few weeks before the next meeting of the Special Body of Experts (this time in Paris), Johnson pressed Worthington for more data. It appeared the RCMP had made a census, sometime after spring 1924, of women working as prostitutes in Canadian cities, although this report was not found among material assembled so far. Johnson made it clear that he was not interested in the entire report; he only wanted to find out how many Americans and foreigners could be identified. If the report was not in the material for New York, then Worthington was to write Ottawa. “I am anxious to have additional material about Canada,” Johnson wrote, “and any facts that you can send me about Canada along statistical lines” (Johnson 1926).

To estimate “the extent of the traffic,” Johnson tried to figure out the proportion of foreign women working as prostitutes. From reports of police and public health organizations, he learned that some 70% to 80% of women in the brothels of Central and South America were foreigners. This was taken as a measure of the illicit sex traffic because the women could not have travelled on their own (League of Nations
1927a: 9–12). The report acknowledges key shortcomings of this method. From the statistics, it was impossible to distinguish the number of resident foreign women from new arrivals; in other words, foreign does not equal trafficked. Further, there were an unknown number of unregistered or clandestine prostitutes about whom it was difficult to be sure of percentages. Nevertheless, this sort of estimate was good enough for League officials, such as Dame Rachel Crowdy, Secretary of the Advisory Committee: “Because the investigators, when they consulted various underworld people as to how the girls got there . . . always heard the same thing – ‘No girl will come by herself’” (Crowdy 1927: 156–57; see further Knepper 2012).

This same sort of logic fills current analyses. In the absence of actual cases from which to draw general conclusions, analysts supply propositions about what seems plausible. The ratio of trafficking victims to cases is unknown: it is impossible to estimate the unknown cases from the few that are known (Laczko 2005: 8). Nevertheless, there has been a tendency to assume that the amount of trafficking we do not know about must be much larger than the trafficking we do know about (Kelly and Regan 2000). This can lead to further “insights” such as claims about the presence of trafficking networks or syndicates. Recent analyses suggest, for instance, that when people move illegally through multiple transit points and countries, the required level of organization increases (Di Nicola 2005: 187; Putt 2007: 2). It has been suggested that “indirect indicators” of trafficking are useful, such as the number of entertainment visas issues for businesses “known anecdotally” as destinations for trafficked persons (Graycar and McCusker 2007: 163).

**Links to organized crime**

Many scholars regard human trafficking as an instance of “transnational organized crime” (Di Nicola 2005; Graycar and McCusker 2007; Shelley 2007, 2010; Viuhko 2010). Shelley (2010) emphasizes the overlap between human traffickers and drug traffickers. Traffickers use similar methods of recruitment, use the same routes and so on, to move illicit commodities, whether drugs or people. She describes various business models and financial enterprises used by global trafficking syndicates to leverage large amounts of money. Other researchers who see a connection between human trafficking and transnational crime suggest that the groups involved are less organized and much smaller compared to mafia-styled organizations (Aronowitz 2009: 120; Papanicolaou 2008: 402; Schloenhardt, Beirne, and Corsbie 2009: 227).
The Report of the Special Body of Experts concluded there was no evidence of inter-continental criminal syndicates. “In spite of a worldwide camaraderie … there would appear to be no organized international group” (League of Nations 1927a: 9). The report did, however, make frequent reference to “the underworld.” The authors portrayed networks of underworld figures in cities in regular communication with each other. These figures exchanged not only women, but various services related to transportation and maintenance of women, such as faked marriage certificates and forged passports. The report also suggested at various points that the traffic in women was connected with “certain other recognised social evils, such as the abuse of alcohol and the traffic in obscene publications and drugs” (League of Nations 1927a: 9).

In Canada, Snow’s researchers found very little evidence of traffic after nearly three years of effort. Specifically, they produced a three-page entry in a compendium of national case studies published as Part 2 of the Report of the Special Body of Experts. The text mentioned that brothels could be found in certain places, such as Montreal. At one time, many Armenians were brought through Canada to the United States although there was “no evidence” any of them became prostitutes. Formerly, there had been a considerable international trade in Chinese girls by secret societies known as “Tongs.” But “no evidence” was found indicating the export of Canadian women. “There was, on the whole, very little traffic in or out of Canada discovered in the course of the investigation” (League of Nations 1927b, 40). This became Ottawa’s official position. Canada’s report to the League’s Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children a few years later made a simple declaration: “the competent Department of the Canadian government state that the traffic in women does not constitute a serious problem in Canada” (Riddell 1933).

Reports of white slave traffic persisted, however. In 1933, an investigator with the RCMP submitted a report of white slave traffic with direct ties to organized crime. Detective sergeant John Leopold had learned from a “reliable authority” that a girl could be purchased for $20 or more, depending on her type and the sexual services she would provide. Leopold stated that one girl he had met in a cabaret in Niagara Falls, New York, was later sold for $200 when she was 18 years of age. Traffickers routinely crossed the international border; girls brought into Canada were sent to the United States and vice versa. It did not matter whether the girl consented or not to go to a certain place because her masters had the means of forcing her. “In that respect the
traders are positively unscrupulous." The traffickers were "almost exclusively Italians," for the most part; members of the "Black Hand" and "Stars of Italy." Leopold’s informant offered to take him to meet the leader of the Black Hand at Niagara Falls, Ontario, who would be happy to supply him with the girl of his wishes (Leopold 1933).

It is difficult to know what to make of claims about the Black Hand operating in Niagara Falls, although there is some reason to be skeptical. Historical research into the operation of the RCMP during the interwar period points to its preoccupation with "menaces brought to Canada from abroad" (Hewitt 2004: 83). The RCMP took an active role in monitoring the activities of labour, ethnic groups, and the radical left, and in investigations of illicit narcotics smuggling. RCMP investigators joined with the Department of Health to pursue inquiries into Chinese drug dealers who posed a threat to white women; Chinese-Canadians furnished most of the suspects (and those arrested) during the 1920s. To monitor "communists" from Eastern and Central Europe, the Mounted Police recruited "secret agents" who would pursue information using undercover techniques. John Leopold, in fact, had started his undercover work with radicals. When exposed in the 1920s, he went to work against drug dealers (Hewitt 2004: 95).

There are reports today, from more than one source, about the involvement of organized crime groups (the 2008 study for the Swedish National Council, for example). And, the fact that the League’s study in the 1920s did not turn up evidence of organized crime says nothing about the quality of the evidence for it now. However, in interpreting this evidence, researchers confront the same temptation to fill gaps in empirical evidence with conceptual analysis. There is a danger for academics in taking what police, journalists, or campaigners claim, and fitting it into what we think we know. Transnational organized crime can be identified, but how far does it extend outside several specific places? "Transnational organized crime" has been described as a concept of American origin that has been successfully exported to other parts of the globe. Through the international campaigns against drug traffickers, human traffickers, and other organized crime groups, American law enforcement officials and advocacy groups have succeeded in the "Americanization" of global crime (Papanicolaou 2008; Woodiwiss 2001).

The League’s research into human trafficking in the 1920s reveals an important moment in the process of Americanization. Although the
United States never officially joined the League of Nations, President Woodrow Wilson established its founding vision. The proposal for the first worldwide study came from the unofficial American delegate to the Advisory Committee, Grace Abbott, who proposed it at a committee meeting in 1923. The financial resources for the research came from an American philanthropy, the Bureau of Social Hygiene, underwritten by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.; not to mention the fact that the Special Body of Experts was led by an American (William Snow); the research team was led by an American (Bascom Johnson), and nearly all the field workers were Americans (Paul Kinsie, George Worthington, etc.).

American influence over the study had profound consequences. Snow and Johnson brought with them a particular understanding of “the underworld” that had come from their experience of attacking vice in American cities during the Prohibition Era. This “methodological nationalism” constitutes one of the most difficult conceptual barriers to research into trafficking today. It is hard to get beyond the nation-state in concepts of crime, law, and justice and avoid defaulting to indicators that have been produced by national governments (Franko Åas 2007: 176–79).

**Conclusions**

There are several lessons to be learned from looking back at the League’s research into human trafficking, but the Canadian portion of the project points to one of the most significant. In Canada, the researchers were not so much looking for evidence of traffic as looking for the means of discrediting the evidence that had been found. As they discovered, it was even more difficult to support a conclusion about trafficking’s not being a problem than to turn up limited evidence suggesting a problem of some larger proportion. This explains why, in looking back some 85 years or so to the League’s research, so little seems to have changed. Reading the *Report of the Special Body of Experts on the Traffic in Women* (1927), there are familiar difficulties: official estimates lack empirical support, advocacy organizations tend to exaggerate, actual cases are rare. And one encounters familiar arguments: It is hard to research hidden populations; we need to rely on indirect indicators; organized crime is involved in some way.

It is very difficult for researchers to set aside trafficking as a problem, to “prove there is no such thing as trafficking.” Police work, political
inquiries, investigations by journalists, and efforts by non-governmental organizations continue to point to evidence of trafficking in women. This was the case in the 1920s, when the League’s researchers set about the Canadian portion of their fieldwork. We could try to learn from their experience, to understand that, whatever the actual dimensions of the problem, human trafficking as a social and political issue persists because it is difficult to formulate the reliable social science measure of activities necessary to evaluate the claims of journalists, advocates, and others. Or, we can ignore this historical experience and pretend that we are the first generation to confront this “new threat.” We prefer, it seems, to think of it as a new problem. Many of those who research human trafficking today do not know about the League’s work, or if they do, do not think it is of much use in understanding the problem of human trafficking today. What I have tried to show, here, is that, to improve the knowledge base with respect to human trafficking, it is important for criminology to incorporate historical knowledge.

Adding historical perspective to criminological study can raise important questions. The official report from 1927 proposed that to solve the problem “requires concerted international action” (League of Nations 1927a: 45). This was not a novel approach, even then. In the late nineteenth century, anti-traffic campaigners had called for international cooperation. Nevertheless, it remains a frequent conclusion even now: many studies, in recent years, urge greater information sharing, cooperation among police, and so on. We could continue to make such recommendations in the hope that, maybe this time, things will be different. Or, we could examine the history of trafficking over the years to see why “international cooperation” has not been achieved, to identify responses that address historical barriers to the proposed solutions.

Note

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